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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a 4-year study that examined 225 cases of alleged sexual abuse of students by teachers. Data were collected through interviews with 225 superintendents who had dealt with incidences of sexual abuse--184 in New York State and 41 in other states. An analysis of 10 of these cases included interviews with superintendents, school attorneys, parents, and community members. The paper first defines sexual abuse and describes its different forms. The second section explains why administrators should pay attention to sexual abuse of students by staff. The third section compares the findings of various studies that have estimated the extent of sexual abuse by teachers and staff. Section 4 examines patterns of staff sexual abuse of students, and section 5 describes school district reporting patterns. Actions taken regarding the staff and students involved are discussed in sections 6 and 7. The eighth section offers suggestions for school-district prevention policies, and the ninth section presents guidelines for handling complaints and investigating charges. In summary, although the vast majority of teachers and staff do not abuse students, some do. The problem is exacerbated by lack of clear school policies, inadequate services for students who have been abused, and misinformation. Six tables are included. (LMI)

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In Loco Parentis: Sexual Abuse of Students in Schools

What Administrators Should Know

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Table of Contents

Sexual Abuse of Students by Staff: What Administrators Should Know

Introduction 1

What is Sexual Abuse? 3

Why Should We Pay Attention to Sexual Abuse of Students by Staff 9

How Widespread is Sexual Abuse of Students by Staff 14

Patterns of Staff Sexual Abuse of Students 19

How Do Districts Respond to Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Students? 26

What Happens to Staff Who Sexually Abuse Students? 30

What Happens to Students Who Are Sexually Abused? 33

What Should School Districts Do to Prevent Sexual Abuse of Students? 34

What Should Districts Do When A Staff Member Is Accused of Sexually Abusing a Student? 36

Summary 38

References 39

Introduction

Every day parents send their children off to school confident that the teachers and administrators there will not only teach them, but insure a safe environment. Most of us believe that whatever the failings of our schools, the people employed in them will not hurt our children. But should we be so trusting?

This report presents the results of a four year study of 225 cases in which students were sexually abused by teachers or other professional staff (Shakeshaft and Cohan). We have documented the types of abuse that occurred and the response of districts. Based upon our interviews with superintendents, school attorneys, parents, and teachers, we have also made recommendations for both preventing this abuse and for dealing with it when it happens.

The original sample was drawn from the population of all superintendents in New York State. An advance letter was sent to 764 superintendents, asking them if they had ever dealt with an incident of sexual abuse of a student by a professional employee. Of the 43% of superintendents that responded, we interviewed 184 of the 192 superintendents who said they had dealt with abuse and would discuss it. After conducting face-to-face and telephone interviews with each of these superintendents, we enlarged our sample to 225, adding 41 superintendents from other parts of the country who had also dealt with allegations of sexual abuse of students by professional staff. Finally, we selected 10 case studies that were typical of our overall findings, and explored these cases in more depth, talking with administators, teachers, parents, community representatives, and school attorneys.

Although our study currently provides the educational community with the only data examining what happens in school districts where professional staff are accused of sexually abusing students, the study is limited in a number of ways. First, it is primarily focused on professional staff, leaving out (with a couple of exceptions) bus drivers, aides, cafeteria workers and custodians. Second, because we were primarily interested in district and administrative responses, for reasons of privacy,

and to cause no further harm to students, we did not interview students. Third, because of the nature of the study, we chose a sample of districts that had dealt with the issue of sexual abuse of students by staff. Therefore, we did not use a random sample and are not able to generalize to all schools, nor document the nationwide reported incidence of sexual abuse in schools. Nevertheless, our data offer a glimpse into what happens in schools when sexual abuse of students by staff is alleged.

What is Sexual Abuse?

There's lots of confusion about what sexual abuse is and isn't. What seems to many as obvious sexual abuse may be to others just annoying behavior. For instance, which of the following would you classify as sexual abuse?

- Mr. Morrissy is a fourth grade teacher who rubs the backs of his students when they get upset. Sometimes he touches their buttocks, shoulders, legs and chests while administering these backrubs. The students say they feel uncomfortable with the rubbing, but other than this, they like Mr. Morrissy as a teacher.
- Louie Reynolds is a geometry teacher who has worked hard to develop materials that will keep his students interested in math. He often accompanies his lectures with pictures of women in sexually suggestive positions to demonstrate angles. He also tells lots of jokes about sexual exploits to keep his students interested.
- Ron Martin, 23, is in his first year of teaching, having recently graduated from college. In addition to teaching music, he directs the band. Rita is a senior and an outstanding flute player. Ron asks her out and after a couple of dates, they have sexual intercourse. They plan to marry once Rita graduates from high school.
- Jim Felder is a middle school teacher and football coach who calls his players "pussy," "fag," or "girl" when they don't perform up to his expectations. These same middle school boys call a classmate who doesn't want to play football a "pussy" and make fun of him in Jim Felder's social studies class. Mr. Felder ignores these interactions.
- Herman Linber, a high school teacher of English, calls the girls in his class "honey" and puts his arms around them when he talks with them.
- Joe Bletsch, a sixth grade teacher touches the groins of the boys in his class when they come to his desk to discuss their work. The boys are aware of what is happening and ask each other, "Has Bletsch got you yet?" They trade strategies for avoiding his touch, but no boy tells anyone outside his peer group about the experience.

- Noel Johnson is a teacher who is having sexual intercourse with Suzy, a ninth grade student in one of his classes. He tells her she is special. Suzy finds she has mixed feelings about the relationship. On the one hand, she is happy to have this extra attention, while on the other hand, she feels anxious about having sex with her teacher, believing it is wrong and not enjoying it very much.

These things happen every day in schools. Are they sexual abuse? What guidelines do we have to help us understand sexual abuse?

The terms sexual harassment, sexual abuse and molestation are often used interchangeably. For our purposes, sexual abuse covers all abuse that is sexual in nature, and sexual harassment is a type of sexual abuse. We do not make a distinction between sexual abuse and sexual harassment, although the latter term is the term used by the legal profession.

We have classified sexual abuse as either non-contact or contact sexual abuse. As Table 1 demonstrates, these two categories cover a range of activities. If the target of the abuse is a child, these activities constitute sexual abuse, despite the age of the abuser.

Table 1
Continuum of Sexual Abuse

Non-Contact Sexual Abuse		Contact Sexual Abuse	
Level I **Visual Sexual Abuse**	**Level II** **Verbal Sexual Abuse**	**Level I** **Fondling, Touching, Stroking, Kissing**	**Level II** **Genital Touching, Vaginal/Anal Insertion, Oral/Genital Contact**
Includes showing sexually explicit pictures, exhibitionism, gestures	Includes sexual comments, jeers, taunts, questions about sexual activity	Includes touching students on the outside of their clothes, on the breasts, buttocks, or sexual hugging and kissing	Includes any touching of genitals, vaginal and anal intercourse, all oral/genital contact

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While Level II contact sexual abuse has historically been more likely to have been described in society as sexual abuse, all other forms of sexual abuse have largely gone un-named until recently. Because we have not acknowledged, until very recently, the full range of sexually abusing behaviors, there is still much confusion about what constitutes sexual abuse, particularly sexual abuse in schools.

Within the past two decades, the term sexual harassment has surfaced to describe both non-contact and contact sexual abuse. Emerging from the discoveries of feminist "consciousness raising" groups of the late 1960s and 1970s, its name underscores the seriousness of its effects. First documented and named by Farley in 1972, the term has been central to the identification, definition, and eradication of sexually unwanted behaviors in the workplace and society at large. The etymology of "Harass" is alternately credited to old English or the French "harasser," "to set a dog on." The American Heritage Dictionary defines harass as: "to disturb or irritate persistently, to enervate an enemy by repeated attacks or raids."

Generally speaking, sexual abuse is unwelcome conduct directed at a person because of the person's gender. Although most sexual abuse is sexual in nature, as long as it is gender-based it may be classified as sexual harassment, even if it is not sexual. Sexual harassment is usually not about sex, even though sex is the vehicle used. It is about power. Abusers are expressing hostility or using power over someone, because of a person's sex.

In attempting to define sexual abuse both in common useage and legally, most people refer to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) definition of sexual harassment. This definition has been used in employment cases and in schools to define staff and peer abuse of students. The EEOC defines sexual harassment as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, (2)submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual, or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. (EEOC Policy Guidelines on Sexual Harassment, Section 1604.11, 29 CFR Chapter XIV, Part 1604)

Using this definition, we can identify characteristics of an abusive act that can help us understand whether or not it is a sexually harassing behavior.

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Unwelcome Conduct

To be classed as sexual abuse, the action must be unwelcome by the person who receives it. The determination of whether or not the conduct is unwelcome is always made by the person who receives the attention, not by the person who gives it. While some victims of sexual abuse let the abuser know that his or her conduct is unwanted, many do not. Fear of reprisals often keeps victims from complaining or from refusing sexual advances. It is important to know that to be classed as unwelcome conduct, the person who is the victim of such behavior does not have to tell the abuser that such behavior is unwanted.

Forms of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse has been classed as being either quid pro quo sexual abuse, meaning something for something, or hostile environment sexual abuse.

Quid pro quo sexual harassment occurs when the abuser requires sexual favors of the victim in return for some action by the abuser. A teacher who tells a student that if she has sex with him, he will give her an A for the course (or if she doesn't have sex, he will give her an F), is guilty of quid pro quo sexual abuse. An administrator who requires a teacher to perform sexual acts to keep a teaching job is similarly guilty.

Hostile environment sexual abuse occurs when someone subjects another person to repeated sexual comments, innuendoes or touching. Because these kinds of activities alter the conditions of employment or interfere with school performance, they are considered sexual abuse. If such conduct is gender-based and creates an intimidating or offensive place for students to go to school, it is considered a hostile environment. While a hostile environment usually requires a pattern of this sort of behavior, sometimes one incident is enough to class it as a hostile environment. Even if the conduct occurs off the school grounds, such as at a school sporting event, on the bus, or a school trip, it can still be classed as hostile environment abuse.

Hostile environment abuse can be caused by teachers, administrators, bus drivers, other staff, or students. Examples of hostile environment abuse include the following:

- Making sexually suggestive remarks, gestures, or jokes
- Making offensive, negative remarks about the victim's gender or physical appearance
- Using derogatory sexual terms for women such as honey,

baby, chick, bitch, etc.

- Deliberate touching, pinching, brushing, or patting
- Displaying offensive sexual illustrations
- Pressuring for dates or sex
- Describing or asking about personal sexual experiences
- Hazing, pranks or other intimidating behavior directed toward the victim because of a victim's gender
- Defaming the reputation of a student in front of the class by implying sexual involvement
- Sexual assault

(Northwest Women's Law Center, 1992, p. 11)

To be classed as hostile environment, the sexual abuse must be both pervasive and severe enough to interfere with the victim's ability to function effectively in the environment.

Thus, persistent and continued are two words associated with this kind of sexual abuse. Although one incident can create a hostile environment, environments are more typically created by continual and persistent harassing words and actions. Mary Budd Rowe of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology once described all forms of sex discrimination (of which sexual harassment is) as, like the rings of Saturn, composed of billions of separate particles which in coming together create an environment.

Reasonable Woman Standard

Because sexual abuse is in the eye of the victim, and because what one person classes as sexual abuse another might call flirting, courts have used the reasonable woman standard to help deterimine whether an environment is sexually hostile. This perspective acknowledges that females identify sexual conduct in school or the workplace as more threatening than do males. Because females are more likely to be raped and sexually assaulted in our society, they are more likely to code sexual behavior differently than males do. Thus, what a man might not find frightening or intimidating, a woman might. As a result, we are asked to look at the act through the eyes of a "reasonable woman" and determine whether or not the environment is hostile. An example of a behavior that a female, but not a male, might find hostile is sexual bantering. For instance, in schools, when students are asked sexual questions or touched sexually, boys are much more likely than girls to say they find the behavior fun or flattering, while girls more likely report it as threatening and frightening.

Non-sexual Harassment

Sometimes the behavior is not sexual at all, but it is still classed as sexual harassment. For instance, if a female in a traditional male subject, such as shop or a buildings and trade class, is harassed by the teacher or students because of her sex, these actions can still be considered sexual harassment. Hiding her school work, not letting her participate, or sabatoging her class activities would constitute sexual harassment if they were done to her because she was female.

Third Party Harassment

Even if the sexual harassment is not aimed at a person, that person can claim harassment if the action has hurt her or him. For instance, if two students tried out for a part in a high school musical and the student who got the part had sex with the faculty director in order to get the part, then the student who did not get the part in the musical could claim sexual harassment.

Given these distinctions, it is clear that all of the cases presented at the beginning of this article are examples of sexual abuse in schools.

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Why Should We Pay Attention to Sexual Harassment of Students by Staff?

It Hurts Students

Studies of the effects of child sexual abuse find that without intervention the harm done lasts a lifetime. For instance, the following are behaviors likely to be exhibited in children who have been sexually abused. While not all of these effects are experienced by every child, the following are common results of childhood sexual abuse:

- Sexual partners at an early age and more unplanned pregnancies and abortions
- Concentration Problems: Academic problems or excessive day dreaming, memory loss or inability to concentrate
- Aggression: Aggressive behavior such as yelling, hitting, breaking things or uncontrolled, unruly and defiant behavior
- Withdrawn: Spends time with friends or other children or withdraws from usual activities
- Somatic Complaints: Can't fall asleep or dizziness and faintness
- Character/Personality Style Difficulties: Nice or pleasant disposition or overly compliant, too anxious to please
- Antisocial: Hangs out with a bad crowd or runs away, takes off
- Nervous/Emotional: Excessive activity, restless, moods change quickly
- Depression: Has difficulty communicating or talking or depressed or very unhappy
- Behavioral Regression: Has difficulty waiting his or her turn or clings to parents
- Body Image/Self Esteem Problems: Overly concerned about cleanliness or does not like her or his body, feels inferior
- Fear: Afraid of the dark or generalized fears
- Postraumatic Stress: Can't fall asleep, moods change quickly, or has panic anxiety attacks (Conte and Schuerman, 1988, p. 166)

The AAUW study of sexual abuse in school indicates that the effects are educational, emotional and behavioral. Table 2 illustrates the outcomes reported by targets of sexual abuse in schools.

Table 2
Student Reports of Effects of Sexual Abuse/Harassment in Schools

Educational	Percent Females	Percent Males
EDUCATIONAL		
Not wanting to go to school	33	12
Not wanting to talk as much in class	32	13
Finding it hard to pay attention in school	28	13
Staying home from school or cutting class	24	7
Making a lower grade on a test paper	23	9
Finding it hard to study	22	9
Making a lower grade in class	20	6
Thinking about changing schools	18	6
Doubting whether you have what it takes to graduate from high school	5	4
EMOTIONAL		
Feeling embarrassed	64	36
Feeling self-conscious	52	21
Being less sure of yourself or less confident	43	14
Feeling afraid or scared	39	8
Doubting whether you can have a happy romantic relationship	30	12
Feeling confused about who you are	25	9
Feeling less popular	18	13
Feeling more popular	8	16
BEHAVIORAL		
Avoiding the person who bothered/ harassed you	69	27
Staying away from particular places in the school or on the school grounds	34	12
Changing your seat in class to get farther away from someone	31	12
Stopping attending a particular activity or sport	17	6
Changing your group of friends	14	6
Changing the way you come or to home from school	14	6

SOURCE: AAUW (June, 1993). Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools. Washington, D.C.: AAUW Educational Foundation, pgs. 15-18.

It is clear from the AAUW study that even though both females and males are sexually abused by school professionals and peers, this abuse has a more negative impact on females than on males. A third of females report not wanting to go to school and nearly one-fourth actually stay home or cut a class to avoid being sexually harassed. Students believe that sexual abuse in schools effects their educational performance and report feeling embarassed, self-conscious, and less confident. They also report avoiding school activities and places where abuse occurs.

It's Against the Law

Sexual abuse and harassment of students by teachers or peers is against the law. In some cases it violates criminal law and convictions result in prison terms. In other cases, it violates civil law and the penalties are monetary. And in some cases, the action is both a criminal and a civil offense. Thus, educational professionals who abuse can lose their jobs, go to jail, and pay fines. Additionally, the courts have found that districts that tolerate the abuse of students by staff and/or peers can be held responsible for money damages.

Sexual abuse in schools is covered under criminal child abuse statutes, criminal rape statutes, other criminal sanctions, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1991 Civil Rights Act, the Fourteenth Amendment, and Title IX of the Educational Admendments of 1972. Additionally, state regulations for teacher and administrator conduct, licensure, and certification may be evoked. The first three categories are criminal proceedings and can result in imprisonment and fines. Title VII and Title IX allow for monetary compensation to the victim and penalties to the workplace or school, while state teacher and administrator licensure and certification regulations can remove a teacher both from a school district and from licensed teaching altogether. Table 3 charts the legal responses to sexual abuse of students.

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Table . 3
Legal Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in the Schools

Legal Remedy	Brief Description	Types of Benefits	Length of Time	Problems of Explanation
Title IX - Educational Amendments of 1972	Federal legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in education; file with ED; a private right to action.	Cut-off of federal funding to the educational institution. School district and officials liable for monetary damages.	Varies regionally; if taken to court can be 1-2 years.	Right to private action; employment covered; sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination.
Title VII - 1964 Civil Rights Act	Federal Legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in employment; file with EEOC	Monetary compensation for back pay, lost benefits, and damages; possible job reinstatement.	2-3 years	Applies to work places with at least 15 employees
Teacher or Administrator Certification Regulations	State certification requirements and regulations governing ability to work as a certified teacher or administrator	Loss of state certification and license to teach or administer schools; suspension and probation possible	Depends on state. 1 to 3 years.	Hearings take a long time. Regulations vary by state. Most states don't have separate classification for sexual abuse of children; can still teach in private schools; no central registry so teacher can move from state to state and gain certification.

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Table . 3
Legal Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in the Schools

Criminal Child Abuse Statutes	Varies state by state; usually includes abuse, neglect and assault of minors by adults	Conviction and/or imprisonment of abuser	Approximately one year.	Victim compensation varies by state. Convicted adults could possibly retain employement or professional associations.
Criminal Rape Statutes	Varies state by state; some include degrees of assault.	Conviction and/or imprisonment of harasser/rapist.	Approximately one year	A woman's previous history with the alleged rapist may be admissible as evidence. Those convicted often receive suspended sentences and/or a court order to receive psychotherapy.
Other Criminal Sanctions	Assault, battery and other criminal charges may be possible; varies state by state	Conviction of harasser; fines or imprisonment	Approximately one year	Similar to rape charges.

Source: Adapted from Who's Hurt and Who's Liable: Sexual Harassment in Massachusetts Schools: A Curriculum Guide for School Personnel, 1986, pp. 17-22.

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How Widespread is Sexual Abuse of Students by Staff?

We don't yet know just how widespread sexual abuse of students by school staff is. We don't know for several reasons: there are very few studies that have documented this problem, studies have not used comparable methodologies and samples, and students don't tell.

For instance, the AAUW study of 8th through 11th grade students gave students a list of sexually harassing behaviors and asked if any had ever happened to them during their entire school career and, if so, by whom were they harassed. The Wellesley study asked girls who read Seventeen Magazine to write about their experiences of sexual harassment. Each year the American Human Association records the number of officially reported incidents through the criminal justice system. Bithell asked adults if they had ever experienced sexual advances by teachers during school, and Wishnietsky asked North Carolina High School graduates if they had experienced sexual harassment from staff at any time in their school career.

While each study is limited, a look at Table 4 indicates that even if the most conservative reports are credited, this is a problem that needs attention.

Table 4
Estimates of the Number of Students Sexually Abused by Staff

Study	Sample Type	Size of sample Data collection method	Percent of students abused	Number abused if generalized to U.S.
American Humane Association NCPCA	Number of reported child abuse cases in U.S.	All reported cases, official numbers	1% includes both male and female	3,840 to 64,000 males and females a year
AAUW, 1993	Random sample of 8-11th grade students in U.S., in 79 school districts,	632 Face to face interviews	14.5% of both males and females; 25% of females; 10% of males	1,702,214 8th to 11th graders
Bithell, 1991	Adults who reported on sexual advances by teachers when they were children	4,340 Mail Survey	1% elementary 3% secondary	269,200 elementary students 372,900 secondary students
Wishnietsky 1991	1990 North Carolina high school graduates	148	60.8% of males and females/ 82.2% females 17.7% males 13.5% sexual intercourse	1,106,750 of 1992 female and male high school graduates 236,250 sexual intercourse
Wellesley Center for Research on Women, 1993 Stein, et al.	Females who voluntarily responded to a Seventeen Magazine survey, grades 2 to 12	4,200 responded 2,002 surveys were analyzed magazine survey Mail survey	3.7% in 1991-1992	700,000 females in 1991-1992

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The AAUW study found that 25% of females and 10% of males reported being sexually harassed in some form by a member of the faculty or staff during their school career. The Wellesley Study of female students which asked only about the prior year, found that 3.7% of the girls reported having been sexually harassed by a member of the faculty and staff during the prior year. Wishnietsky's study of high school graduates found that 60.8% of males and 82.2% of females reported having experienced sexual harassment by a faculty or staff during their school career.

Studies of the number of students who are sexually abused by school staff won't tell us much about the number of teachers who abuse students, since many adults who sexually abuse students have multiple victims. Further, there has been no nationwide, reliable study of this problem. Estimates of the number of teachers who sexually abuse students range from .04 to 5% or 1,085 to 135,629 who have sexually abused students. Estimates further project that about one fourth of districts deal with this problem. Table 5 shows the range from studies of teachers and staff who sexually abuse.

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Table 5
Estimates of the Number of Teachers Who Sexually Abuse Students

	Bithell, 1991	Shakeshaft and Cohan, 1991	Wishnietsky 1991
Sample Type	Adults who reported on sexual advances by teachers when they were children	Superintendents in New York	Superintendents in North Carolina
Size of Sample Data Collection Method	4,340 Mail Survey	200 Telephone and Face-to-face interviews	65 Mail Survey
Percent of Teachers who Abuse Students	5%	N/A	.04 to .156
Number Who Abuse if Generalized to All Teachers	135,629	N/A	1,085 to 4,254
Number and Percent of Districts if Generalized to all U.S. School Districts	N/A	4,024 26.2%	4,254 27.7%
Average number of Teachers per District who Sexually Abuse Students if Generalized	8.8	N/A	.07 to .27%

Notes: Based upon numbers from Digest of Education Statistics, 1992 to estimate number of K-12 teachers (2,712,000) and the number of K-12 public school districts (15,358).

One question that often comes up from school people when we discuss our work is "What about false allegations?" In our study, 7.5% superintendents told us that some allegations turned out to either be untrue or that the superintendents decided that although the behaviors had occured, they were not serious enough to be considered sexual abuse. In some cases, the superintendents decided that the reported abuse was not as serious as the student or parent felt it was, and, therefore, re-coded the incident as a false allegation. Under our current understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse, many of these incidents are, in fact, against the law. This is not to say charges are never fabricated. They are. However, it does lend support to the data that tell us that false allegations constitute only a small percentage of all allegations.

More likely than students reporting incidents that didn't happen are students not reporting incidents that did. The AAUW study, for instance, found that of students who have been sexually harassed in schools, only 7% report the incident to a teacher and 23% report to a parent. Studies consistently find that childhood sexual abuse is under-reported, with most professionals estimating that only 2 to 6% of sexual abuse of children is reported to an official source. These numbers are consistent with the AAUW report.

If these projections are correct, then the study on which we are reporting only accounts for from 2 to 7% of the sexual abuse of students by professional staff that is happening in schools. We don't know what is happening in the other 98 to 93% of the cases!

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Patterns of Staff Sexual Abuse of Students

Types of Abuse

In our study, we found a range of sexual abuse across grade levels. In all grades we found both contact and non contact sexual abuse of students by staff. However, superintendents were more likely to report allegations of contact sexual abuse than non-contact sexual abuse, thus confirming our suspicion that when cases of sexual abuse are reported, they are more likely to be cases of physical abuse than cases of non-physical abuse. In our study, 89% of all cases are contact or physical sexual abuse cases, with 92% of cases reported by males and 88% of cases reported by females contact abuse allegations. Of all cases, 38% were at the elementary, 20% at the secondary, 36% at the high school, and 6% across levels.

Non-Contact Sexual Abuse

Verbal: Typical of the verbal abuse reported was a sixth grade teacher who was calling his students "boobies" and telling girls they had "nice legs". A high school teacher was reported by a parent as being "overly friendly" and asking his female students "What's the matter? Isn't your boyfriend giving you enough? Can't he get it up?" Another teacher referred to his female students as "My love".

Verbal abuse was typically not seen as very serious by superintendents. Although they did identify that teachers had been accused of verbal sexual abuse, they were often not able to remember exactly what the teacher had been accused of saying. More often than not, the superintendent coded verbal sexual abuse as language indiscretion and most would not have included verbal abuse as a form of sexual harassment, had we not followed up with probes. By and large, then, superintendents didn't see what harm verbal abuse did.

Visual: Visual abuse included showing pornographic material, exposing oneself to the students or using obscene gestures. For instance, in one case, a fourth grade teacher had pornographic materials in

his desk which he showed the children. He told the superintendent that the pornography had been mailed in a brown paper package to him at the school because he didn't want his wife to find out about it.

Similarly, a superintendent in a large urban school district reported that a male speech teacher in his mid-thirties invited students to his apartment and showed them pornographic materials. The superintendent hastened to add that there had been no touching of students, just the exchange of pornography. In a small city school district, a 56 year old male teacher had exposed himself to a 12 year old student.

Superintendent response to these incidents placed them as more severe than visual sexual abuse, but still not in the category of seriously damaging activity.

Contact Sexual Abuse

The most frequent allegations made by students about school personnel were found in the category of contact sexual abuse. These cases were found at the elementary, middle, and secondary school levels. Allegations included in this category were described as pinching, fondling, laying hands on students, tickling, placing hands on genital area, holding children upside down, touching breasts, caressing, feeling, and drawing circles on a girl's chest.

Complaints of inappropriate touching were made at all levels. At the elementary level, most complaints of touching came from two or more students. At the high school level, however, cases were more likely to be individual, with only one student reporting inappropriate behavior by a teacher. At all levels, the majority of the accusations were against male professionals.

For instance, one superintendent in a rural area described a male elementary school teacher who was "patting kids on various places." The superintendent characterized this behavior as "not serious", even though some of the places were the breasts, genitals, and buttocks. Another male teacher was accused of having only the elementary female students sit on his lap. In yet another case, a male bus driver was accused of pinching the breasts of a first grade girl, and in another district four high school girls reported that a male biology teacher kept them after school and touched them on the breasts, buttocks, and genitals.

When the abuse moved from unwanted and inappropriate touching to intercourse, the superintendents tended to use the words molestation, adult sex, and sexual activity. Again, these cases occured at

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all levels and the majority of cases were male to female abuse.

In one case, a male special education teacher had intercourse in the classroom with a high school girl from one of his special education classes. In another case, a fifth grade teacher was alleged to have had intercourse in the classroom on different occasions with 5 female students from his class. In yet another case, a male physical education teacher who had been with the district for 18 years was accused of intercourse with seven, eight, and nine year old female students.

One superintendent reported repeated abuse of a 13 year old student by a male teacher over a period of a year and a half. Another superintendent described a case in which "a male teacher was involved in fellatio" in the middle of a local shopping center parking lot at 3:10 in the afternoon. The victim was "an emotionally disturbed female student from his special education class." The student was told by the district to "stay away from the teacher".

In these cases, the sexual abuse often took place off the school grounds. Several reports indicated that students were invited to the teacher's home, where sexual activity occurred. In other cases, students were sexually abused at after school and weekend extra-curriculuar activities. Abuse also frequently occurred in a parked car, in school parking lots, mall parking lots, or on deserted roads.

Abusers

The teachers who sexually abuse are often considered among the best teachers in a district and they are very popular among students and parents. Allegations were most likely to be made against school staff members who worked after school with students in extra-curricular activities or against teachers who had one-to-one contact with students. For instance, a disproportionate number of accusations were against coaches, drama, art, music and gym teachers. Male coaches of female teams were accused of having sex with members of their team. Often the abusers had been awarded outstanding teacher prizes by local and state organizations and they are the kind of teacher that parents hope their children will get.

The majority (96%) of the abusers are males. Of the students males sexually abused, 76% were females and 24% were males. Of the students females sexually abused, 86% were females and 14% were males. However, only 4% of students were sexually abused by females.

Pedophiles vs Romantic/Bad Judgment Abusors: Male abusers tended to be of two types: pedophiles and what we have named romantic/bad judgment abusers. The difference in these two groups is

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their intent. However, despite different intentions, the harm to the students is the same. Nevertheless, we have divided these sexual abusers into two groups because we believe that each group requires different prevention and intervention strategies to stop their behavior.

Pedophiles report being sexually attracted to children and have chosen to work in schools so that they can be close to children. Their victims are primarily students in elementary and early middle school. These students are most often vulnerable kids wanting and needing attention and affection. Pedophiles report conscious strategies to find child sexual partners. In addition to targeting particularly needy kids, pedophiles test prospective victims to see if they can be trusted to keep a secret. By putting the children through a series of "tests" that let the pedophile know which kids are likely to talk about the experience and which kids won't, pedophiles are able to eliminate children who might report the sexual abuse. Further, pedophiles court their victims, slowly introducing physical touch or pornography in ways that entrap victims and make them feel responsible. One description of how pedophiles court victims shows how they use the neediness of the students to get sex:

It is a sad reality that many pedophiles succeed not by threats of force, but by offering children what they are not getting anywhere else: care, concern, warmth, and affection. They recognize their needs and, because they are often immature themselves, they can communicate on a very immediate level. Children may find them attractive, "fun" people.(Herbert, 1985, p. 11)

An article in the 1993 January-February NAMBLA Bulletin (NAMBLA stands for North American Man/Boy Love Association) offers advice to men who want to have sex with boys:

My first suggestion is to restrict your sexual involvement and overtures to boys who need you, boys who value you and your friendship. They might be fatherless or they might feel misunderstood, unappreciated, or neglected by whatever family they currently have....Before risking any direct sexual overture, you can tell a lot about a boy with a few well-placed sexual jokes or comments. This works best in one-on-one situations, with just you and your friend....If he blushes, becomes exceedingly embarrassed, or refuses to comment at all, forget about going any farther. The boy who isn't comfortable talking with you about sex sure as hell won't be happy doing it with you. The reaction you are looking for is relaxed acceptance....Every kid is different and requires sensitivity and pursuit at his own pace. (I invested two years courting one particularly good-looking boy before he invited me into his pants)....Anyway, I recommend progessing in stages, increasing the level of contact one step at a time, with careful study of his reaction

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between every move....Eventually you want to joke about masturbation. You want to admit to each other that you masturbate....The time between each advance is critical. You have to develop patience and a sense of attentive timing. I am talking about anywhere from five minutes to a year!....Invite one of [your] friends over - again by himself. Leave a pornographic magazine someplace where he is sure to find it, but where the discovery can still be considered accidental.....If you think you might like working with disadvantaged kids, you won't need much help....Take good care of them and trust that some will take good care of you....You'll do yourself a world of good by performing oral sex on your boys. It's an acquired taste, but once you get used to it you'll find you can suck for hours. The advantage it gives you is that it will bring the boy almost certain pleasure. This is what you want. I have yet to meet a boy who disliked being blown. By giving him pleasure, you increase the chance he will keep your secret to himself in our homophobic and pedophobic culture. You also give him an excellent reason to come back for more. (NAMBLA Bulletin, January-February, 1993, pgs. 26-31)

This long excerpt from an even longer article points out the predatory and calculated approach used by pedophiles.

Research on pedophiles finds they have usually victimized many children. For instance, a study of pedophiles in Oregon found that the average number of children that convicted pedaphiles admit to abusing is 9 (NDAA Bulletin, 1988, p. 3). Other studies put the number of pedophiles at 4 million (Murphy, 1992, p. 25). Using the results of these two studies, we might estimate that 36 million children are being sexually abused by pedophiles!

We named the other group of men who sexually abused students romantic/bad judgment abusers. In these cases, the sexual abusers did not have an obsession for sex with children and usually targeted older middle school and high school females. These men saw their actions as either harmless or romantic. In the latter case, they described verbal sexual harassment and touching as harmless activities that they had grown up seeing as the natural way to deal with females. While they didn't specifically work in schools so they could be close to students, they, nevertheless, sexually abused the students in their care. These abusers usually had what they termed "affairs with high school girls" and often stated they didn't see what the harm was, since the girl wasn't doing "anything against her will". These abusers also touched students on the breasts and buttocks, commented on the physical appearance of students, and asked females to talk about their sex lives with their boyfriends. While the students in these cases weren't always vulnerable or needy students, they often were, especially when the abuse included sexual intercourse.

When women teachers sexually abused students, the students were older middle school or high school students and all of these relationships were described as "romantic" encounters. Most of the cases were described by superintendents as an over-interest of a female teacher in a female student. For instance, in one case the teacher was fired for taking groups of girls to New York City to see plays. In another case, the teacher took female students on educational trips. In two other cases, the teachers wrote notes to the students, claiming affection. In these types of cases, no allegations were made that sexual contact was made, but because these women were lesbians, it was decided that their conduct was unbecoming a teacher. While we didn't have enough of these cases to do further analysis, the nature of what we have would indicate that homophobia and sexism might have combined in superintendents' higher expectations of female conduct. For the most part, the behavior that resulted in a charge against a woman or the loss of her job would not have resulted in a charge against a man or the loss of his job.

Targets

Of those who reported being sexually abused, 22% were males and 78% females. They were elementary, middle and high school students. Males were more likely to be sexually abused in elementary school than in high school, with females being about equally likely to be sexually abused in elementary and high school. Table 6 shows the percentage of sexual abuse by sex and educational level.

These students were often vulnerable, needy students who came from homes where little affection was shown or where there was little semblence of a family. Several of the female victims reported living with alcoholic and sexually abusive fathers. Many of the students were marginal academically as well as socially. Middle and high school female victims were often more physically developed than classmates and had histories of "bad girl" behavior, making them less believable as witnesses.

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Table 6

Educational Level by Sex of Students Abused

	Percent Elementary	Percent Middle/JHS	Percent High School
Females	37.0	21.0	42.0
Males	52.6	21.1	23.3

How Do Districts Respond to Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Students?

Reporting Patterns

Few districts had outlined the reporting procedures expected when an allegation of student sexual abuse by a staff member occurred. Superintendents learned of the abuse from various sources. In most cases, the parents of the child contacted the school, usually through the principal, but sometimes through another staff member or the police. In fewer cases, the student, a friend of the student, or the parent of the friend came to the school with the allegations. After investigating the cases, a number of superintendents found that, although she or he had received this particular complaint, earlier allegations had been made against the staff member, but they had not been reported or passed on to the superintendent. With few exceptions, superintendents did not report allegations to police or to child protective service sexual abuse hotlines.

Investigatory Patterns

As mentioned early, most schools did not have district policies or procedures for dealing with allegations of sexual abuse of students by staff. Often, there was confusion about legal responsiblities and reporting procedures. In many of these cases, policies and procedures were developed at the time or after the case.

However, most districts followed the pattern of having the superintendent question the student first. This was sometimes done with the parents present and sometimes without their knowledge. If the superintendent was convinced that the charge was serious (as opposed to true), the superintendent usually called the school attorney, the board president, and the union president to let each know what was happening. Then the superintendent met with the accused, usually in the presence of others such as a union representative, another administrator, or sometimes an attorney. After outlining the charges, the superintendent questioned the accused.

Investigations tended to be poorly carried out. Superintendents rarely contacted the police or the local district attorney, nor did they report the allegations to child abuse hotlines. Most investigations were kept

in-house and superintendents rarely tried to find confirming testimony or evidence. Often, a teacher's claim that the allegation was untrue or that the behavior had been misunderstood ended the investigation. In many cases, superintendents gave the accused teachers a complete summary of the allegations prior to questioning them about the incident. This behavior allowed teachers to develop stories and responses before making a statement. Finally, questioning of students tended to be incomplete or done in a way that could frighten or intimidate students.

We also found evidence that superintendents took allegations against female teachers more seriously than allegations against male teachers. Behaviors that might have resulted in a slap on the wrist for males, resulted in termination for females. Although the majority of abuse is of females, superintendents seemed to consider abuse of males a more serious offense. Superintendents discussed these cases in greater length, knew more details about them, and reported they pursued them with more energy. A male who reported being sexually abused by a teacher was seldom suspected of lying or of complicity, something not true of female accusers.

Homosexual acts were seen as more serious than heterosexual acts. Thus, students who reported same-sex abuse were more likely to be believed and to be considered more damaged than students who reported other-sex abuse. This pattern is related to the way female accusers were treated, since the majority of these students were sexually abused by males, as were the majority of male students.

Superintendent Response

Most superintendents reported ambivalance and divided loyalties when they discussed the cases. Many reported that they were unsure where their duty was: should they protect the alleged victim or the alleged abuser? Superintendents reported that they could often sympathize with the alleged abuser, but only if the victim was a female. Common was a response similar to this: "What he did was wrong, but I can understand how it happened. He shouldn't have done it, but those girls wear such short skirts."

Superintendents also reported being unable to believe the charges when they were first presented, since the accused was often an outstanding teacher or administrator and the target a marginal student. In many cases, the superintendents were personal friends of the abuser, having worked and socialized with the teacher or administrator for years. They discussed the difficulty of investigating a friend.

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If superintendents' responses were ambivalent, staff responses often weren't, at least as superintendents tell the story. Superintendents reported that other teachers rallied to the defense of the accused teacher, often in ways that they believed jeopardized the investigation and intimidated the students. Teachers often believed that the allegations were lies and that the administration was going after a good teacher. When allegations were investigated, superintendents reported they believed all teachers felt they weren't being supported.

A story that was echoed in different settings was the following account of how district teachers supported the accused, right up until the time he confessed.

Two fourth grade females told a guidance counselor that their male fourth grade teacher was touching their breasts and buttocks and kissing them. The guidance counselor called the superintendent who questioned the girls. During this interview, the girls said, "If you don't believe me ask (and gave names of students in junior high). Interviews with the junior high girls confirmed that the same things had happened to them in the fourth grade and they gave names of high school girls who had been touched and kissed. The high school girls told the same story. By the end of the day, eight girls from fourth to twelfth grade told stories of repeated touching and kissing by the fourth grade teacher over the past 8 years. When the investigation was completed, the superintendent charged the teacher with sexually abusing students and began a 3020A hearing to terminate his employment. Male teachers who worked in the district talked with the student witnesses/accusers and tried to get them to change their testimony, saying they would be responsible for ruining the career of a perfectly fine teacher. To the younger students, the teachers said, "I am your older sister's teacher and I am shocked that you would do this. You are doing a bad thing." During the 3020-A hearing, teachers of the student witnesses/accusers tried to attend when the students told their stories. The superintendent had to have them removed.

In addition to intimidation of student accusers, we found that staffs and superintendents in all schools — not just schools in which a teacher has been accused of sexually abusing a student — over-react. In our interviews as well as in our talks with school staffs, we find that school personnel have a tendency to move very quickly from talking about the safety of children to the safety of adults. Despite the low number of false allegations and the large amount of unreported sexual abuse of students,

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educational professionals are likely to focus on the harm that might come to them because schools are addressing this problem. This increased anxiety of teachers and administrators has caused some teachers and school districts to ban touching of children by teachers. Obviously, this response harms children, since physical contact and affection is believed by many to be a healthy and educationally sound part of the teacher-student relationship.

Community Response

Like teachers, communities tended to rally around the accused teacher. A number of superintendents reported that they were seen as the "bad guy" in the community for bringing charges against a popular teacher and/or coach. Often angry groups of parents and community members would come to the school or to a board meeting to demand that the persecution of the particular teacher stop.

For instance, one superintendent reported that, after beginning a 3020-A hearing to terminate a teacher for sexually abusing a number of students, she set up a meeting with parents, since there was so much community unrest about the charges. She and her attorney were confronted by "200 absolutely furious parents who felt that the teacher was being falsely accused." The school attorney was unable to give details of the accusations and would only say that the district was pursuing an investigation. The parents became more and more angry, accusing the superintendent, who at the start of this case had only been in the district 3 months, of being out to get the teacher. Finally, the superintendent faced the crowd saying, "You are attacking me because I heard allegations of sexual abuse of a student by a teacher and I am doing something about it. What kind of leader would you want? Would you want me to do nothing? I don't do that."

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What Happens to Staff Who Sexually Abuse Students?

If the superintendent and the school board believed that the charges were true, then they took one of several actions: tried to get rid of the teacher, formally disciplined the teacher, or informally spoke to the teacher. The following are what happened to the teachers who were accused of sexually abusing students:

- 38.7% resigned, left the district, or retired
- 15.0% were terminated or not re-hired
- 8.1% were suspended and then resumed teaching
- 11.3% received a verbal or written reprimand
- 17.5% were spoken to informally
- 7.5% were false accusations
- 1.9% were unresolved at the time of this study

Removal from the District

Teachers were removed from the district in three ways: they resigned, they retired, or they were terminated. A number of superintendents reported that they encouraged the faculty member to retire or to resign. In the former cases, the district offered the teacher retirement benefits and in the latter cases the district agreed to tell an inquiring school district only that the reasons for the teacher's resignation were personal. The superintendents justified these compromises by saying that they weren't sure they would win if they tried to terminate the teacher, and that the the procedure would cost the district time and money.

When the teacher was untenured, the superintendents reported no difficulty in terminating them. For those who were tenured, termination in New York State required a 3020-A hearing to prove the teacher unfit to teach. These cases often dragged on for several years, during which the teacher was suspended.

Of the nearly 54% who resigned, weren't rehired, retired, or were terminated, superintendents reported that 16% were teaching in other schools and that they didn't know what had happened to the other

84%. While most superintendents did nothing or supported the employment of the sexually abusing teacher elsewhere by not giving an explanation for why the person no longer worked in the district, several superintendents tried hard to keep the person from teaching. For instance, one superintendent reported that "the teacher went on to work in another school district. He used the former principal as a reference. I followed the guy to two subsequent school districts, called those superintendents and had the teacher suspended." Another superintendent reported that he had found out that although the teacher had retired, he was substituting in another district. "I called the district and had him fired."

However, we uncovered a number of cases in which a teacher confronted with allegations of sexual abuse of a student in one district turned up in another, without the hiring district knowing about these allegations. The practice is common enough that the superintendents referred to it as "passing the trash".

Continued to Teach in District

Not all districts passed their trashed. Nearly 37% of the accused teachers continued to work in their districts, despite the belief by their superintendents that they had sexually abused a student. Of those who continued to teach in the district, 8.1% were suspended from their jobs for a period of time and then resumed their teaching duties. In some cases, they were required to seek counseling, while in others they were merely suspended. One superintendent tried to terminate a teacher who had been found guilty in criminal proceedings of sexually abusing students. Instead, the hearing panel in the 3020-A termination hearings recommended suspension for 2 years, counseling, and re-instatement as a teacher. The superintendent, with great frustration, told us, "We spent thousands of dollars of the district's money and hundreds of hours of my time on this case. He was found guilty in a court of law and come next fall, he'll be back in my district teaching!"

In about 11% of these cases, the faculty member received a verbal or written reprimand. Superintendents reported: "A letter was placed in the teacher's file." "A verbal warning was given to the teacher." "I chewed the hell out of him and warned about future charges. I told him if there were a next time, it would not just be a reprimand, but charges would be brought."

In 17% of the cases, the teacher continued to work in the district without a formal reprimand. In some cases, the superintendents

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defended this practice by saying that although the act had occured, the teacher hadn't intended to sexually abuse a child. In another case, the teacher apologized to the parents (not the children) for making sexual comments and touching their children in sexual ways.

The teacher was willing to speak to the parents in the principal's presence and apologize. The parents came in angry and expected a whitewash. Instead, the teacher said, "Yes, I've done those things, but I didn't have any sexual intent." The parents calmed down. The more the parents became aware of what I thought was the sincerity of the teacher, the more they were willing to accept the apology and drop the matter.

In several cases, the teachers were transferred to another school in the district or reassigned duties. One superintendent used this method in the case of a teacher who had sexually abused high school females: "The teacher was transferred from a high school to an elementary school. Now he was not near adolescents." In another case, a special education teacher, having sexually abused female students, was assigned only to male students.

Revocation of Teaching License

Termination of a tenured teacher in a district does not require revocation of the teaching license. These are two separate procedures. In only 1% of the cases that we studied did the superintendents attempt to have the teaching license of the teacher who sexually abused students revoked.

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What Happens to the Students Who Are Sexually Abused?

In over half the cases (58.8%), superintendents reported that no help was given by the district to the victim. In the remainder of the cases, counseling was offered to the victim, although the superintendents were unclear about what services the victims were receiving. In most cases, the superintendents believed that if the abuse was reported and stopped, the problem was over. Few superintendents seemed to have a clear understanding of the long-term effects of sexual abuse of children and the importance of intervention.

The superintendents did report that the students who accused their teachers of sexual abuse were often ostracized by other students, teachers, and members of the community. Because the student accusers were often vulnerable, marginal students and because those they accused were popular teachers and substantial community members, there was often much ammunition available with which to attack the student. In many cases, the superintendent reported that the student left the district or dropped out of school, even though their charges had been substantiated. Little was done to protect these students, to counsel the educational community about the appropriate response to the accusers, or to support the student against attacks.

For students who stay in school and receive no intervention, we can expect that they will experience some or all of the outcomes outlined in Table 2. Districts must do more than stop the abuse. Students need counseling and support to regain their self esteem, sense of safety, and dignity.

What Should School Districts Do to Prevent Sexual Abuse of Students ?

Our study and the work of others indicate that some districts do better than others at both diminishing sexual harassment and abuse of students and dealing with it when it does happen. Those districts which have less sexual abuse have at least three things in common. First, they have strong and clear sexual harassment policies. Second, these districts widely and frequently make sure all employees and students know what the policy is and how people can make complaints. And third, they educate students and staff about sexual harassment, about district policy, and about what to do if harassment occurs. In these districts, school staff are aware of possible symptoms of sexual harassment and speak up when they see signs that a student might be being abused. In these districts complaints are taken seriously.

Policies

Sexual harassment policies should define sexual harassment, express disapproval of harassment, make it clear that the district is committed to eliminating harassment, encourage victims to come forward, prohibit retaliation, and be written in clear and simple language (Northwest Women's Law Center, 1992). Effective complaint procedures should:

- Be flexible enough to accommodate the varied situations that could arise
- Contain informal and formal complaint mechanisms
- Identify several different persons to whom complaints can be brought
- Provide time frames for bringing complaints and investigat ing and resolving them
- Not promise absolute confidentiality, but state that confiden tiality will be protected to the extent that the investigative process allows
- Be written in clear and simple language.

(Northeast Women's Law Center, 1992, p. 30)

Training needs to be done with all staff as well as with students, and it should occur more than once. Annual training sessions allow new staff members to be trained. Training sessions should help employees and students understand the district sexual harassment policy and complaint procedures, should define sexual abuse and harassment, and should present examples of behavior that is not allowed. Staff need to learn how to help students talk about the issues of sexual harassment and how certain language and behavior stop students from telling their stories.

What Should Districts Do When a Staff Member is Accused of Sexually Abusing a Student?

Handling Complaints

While the district policy and procedures will outline the reporting mechanism in schools, we recommend that the policy require that all allegations of staff to student sexual harassment be transmitted to the superintendent or to a special unit assigned to investigate sexual abuse of students by staff. The only such unit that we know of is in New York City, where all complaints are to be reported immediately to The Special Commissioner of Investigations, whose unit investigates all allegations of sexual abuse of students by staff in New York City Public Schools.

Investigation of Charges

We believe that all charges should be investigated by a trained investigator. This means that the district either turns the investigation over to the local police (assuming that the local police have experience in investigating child sex crimes), that the district hire a private investigator who has experience in investigating child sexual abuse to do the investigation, or that the district work with intermediate agencies to set up a special unit within the region or state to deal with allegations of sexual abuse of students by staff.

It is important to act quickly in these situations. In some states, the child sexual abuse hotline must be called and the allegation reported. If parents are not the ones who brought the complaint, then they need to be contacted immediately and encouraged to report the abuse to law enforcement officers. The accuser, the alleged harasser, and any witnesses need to be interviewed. When interviewing the accused, inform the employee of the allegations, but do not provide details of the alleged abuse at this time. Immediately remove the employee from contact with students during the investigation and resolution.

Students who accuse teachers of sexual abuse are likely to be harassed by other students and by teachers. They are also likely to come from homes in which little support will be available to them. The effects of sexual abuse are life-long unless interventions take place. It is important that the district take responsibility for the well being of the target of the abuse after the abuse is stopped.

Summary

Our data indicate that children are at risk in schools and that some of the very people who are supposed to be helping them end up inflicting harm. While the vast majority of teachers and staff do not sexually abuse students, some do. Our concern is that school officials may not be responding effectively to the sexual abuse that does occur; school procedures and policies have not been developed to protect students from abuse by educational practitioners.

We found few districts that had in-service opportunities for staff or policies about how to deal with sexual abuse by staff. We found no districts where touching and contact had been adequately and comprehensively discussed and explored, examining helpful and harmful implications. We found superintendents who seemed perplexed about where their loyalties lay and how they should handle the situation. We found cases of students who were not given adequate counseling and support during and after the allegation process. And finally, we found districts that encouraged teachers to refrain from interacting with students, further harming the student-teacher relationship. In other words, we found misinformation, abuse, and confusion — all of which hurt children.

We believe that documenting the problem and talking about it will begin to help all school professionals act in the best interests of the children. We hope this is a beginning to this discussion.

Notes

1 This work was partially funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

2 Because of the confidentiality of victims and to keep them from experiencing further harm, we did not interview the students who were sexually abused.

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